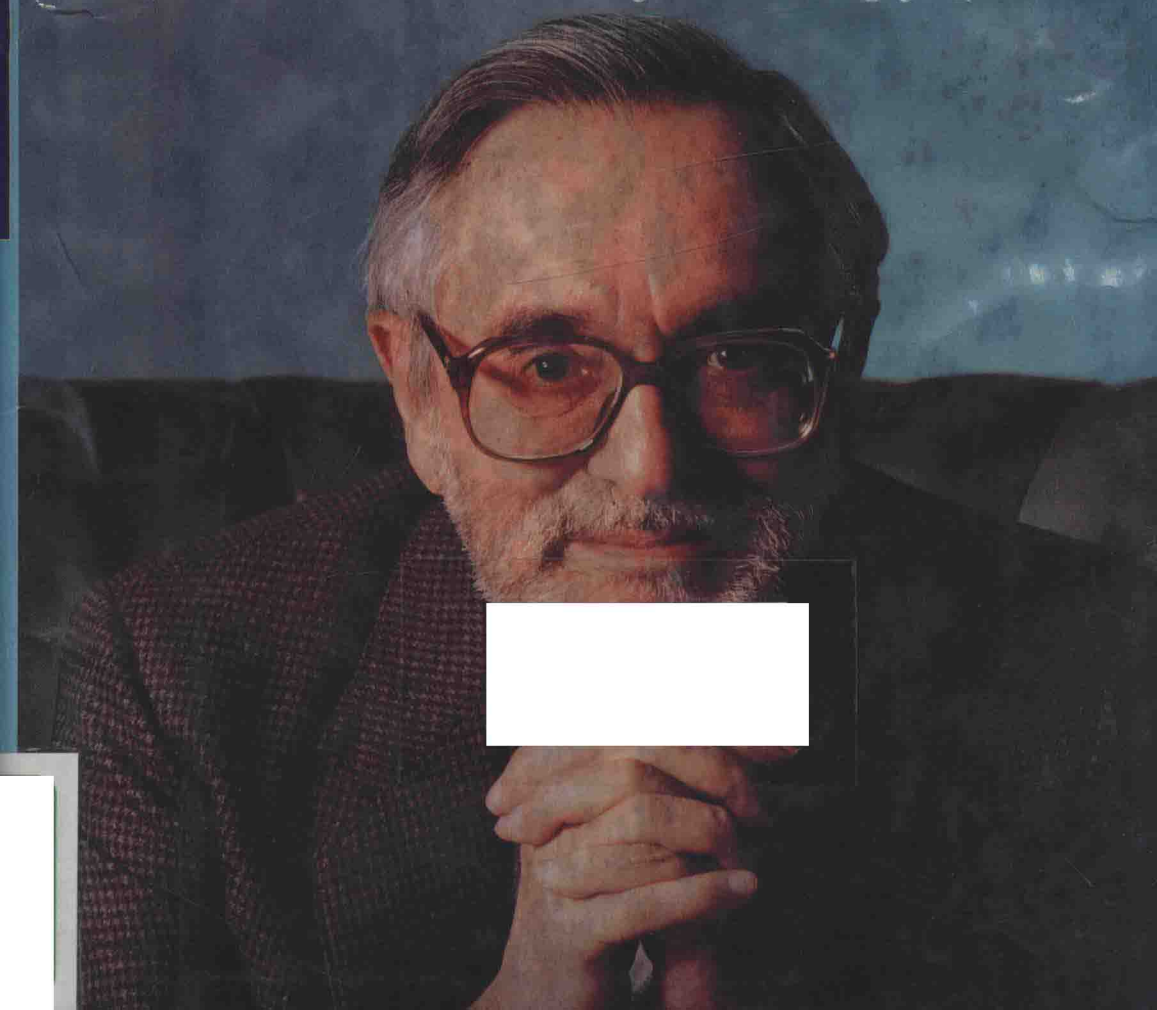


Salvador Minuchin
Michael P. Nichols

FAMILY HEALING

Tales of Hope and Renewal
from Family Therapy



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FAMILY HEALING

Preface

After thirty years as a family therapist, I proclaimed myself an elder. After all, I was there when family therapy began. I was one of the ones who helped it grow, and I have seen it move, for better or worse, from being a radical new departure, a novel way of looking at people and helping them, to its present secure position within the mental health establishment.

In the best tradition of storytelling, the elder, seated on a low bench, regales his audience with the exciting adventures of his youth. So I wrote four autobiographical chapters. But when I began to look at cases that could represent a universe of families and describe the way I work, I felt overwhelmed by

proximity. I realized that one of the barriers to an honest account of therapy would be the tendency to read my own theories into my client families, recreating them in my own image. The collaboration with Mike Nichols began at this point. Together we reviewed dozens of cases to select ones that would illustrate various stages of family development and the issues that crop up to bedevil all families. Although we included some exceptional and unusual families, most of the stories in this book are about ordinary human beings learning life's painful lessons. Mike took on the thankless task of transcribing the tapes of the sessions and brought fresh eyes to encounters that had become so much part of me that I was in danger of imposing my bias on what actually happened. As you will see, I have tried to help the reader understand some of the critical issues that families wrestle with and some of what was going on in my own mind as I tried to help them solve the problems that brought them to therapy.

After Mike sent me the transcripts, I went over them to reduce them to manageable size and to add my thoughts about the meaning of the therapeutic encounter. We met on numerous weekends, going over the material together, pruning the superfluous content, and rechecking the tapes to ensure complete accuracy. It was a rich and satisfying collaboration.

Because I wanted to let the family members tell their own stories, we limited our selection to cases for which I had tapes. For that reason we could not include some long-term treatment cases. We also excluded the whole body of my work with poor and welfare families. I felt that the characteristics of this work would require a description of institutions and larger systems than could be encompassed in the format of this book. Naturally we changed the names and identifying characteristics of the families, but otherwise the stories you read are told exactly the way they happened.

I want to thank my wife, Pat, who has been an integral part of my life for more than forty years and now shares more than half of my memories. She read and reacted to the stories, but her participation in the autobiographical chapters was even more essential: She brought flavor and accuracy to my description of the events we lived together. I thank her for the past and for the present.

As with all my previous books, I want to thank Fran Hitch-

cock, who has become indispensable in my writing. She is my grammarian, editor, sounding board, critic, and friend. Mike and I would also like to thank Joyce Seltzer of The Free Press for expert guidance and encouragement.

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PART ONE

THE MAKING OF A FAMILY THERAPIST

1

Family Roots

FEBRUARY, 1992

I am in a state psychiatric hospital to do a consultation with Tony, age ten, and his family. Before I see the family, the staff tells me about Tony. I listen attentively. When he was eight his mother took him to a prestigious university hospital, where he remained for ten months. His diagnosis was attention deficit disorder, a variation on the previous label, minimal brain dysfunction, that replaced his first diagnosis, hyperactivity—all of them meaning pretty much that the child has poor impulse control and a short attention span. In the university psychiatric ward, doctors tried to find the appropriate dose of medication that would make him fit to return home. After trying a variety of doses and medications, they decided

to refer him to a state psychiatric hospital. Tony has been here for a year, so he has spent 20 percent of his short life in psychiatric wards.

At the state hospital Tony has individual, group, recreational, and sundry other therapies. He attends a highly structured school and lives in a cottage with other children in a token-economy milieu, meaning that they earn stars for good behavior that can be exchanged for special treats later on. Focusing not on Tony but on his neurological system, the psychiatrist rattles off a long series of pharmacological trials. He says that at the university hospital, Tony was given Ritalin and Mellaril, with the focus on aggression and the attention problems, while here the issues of separation anxiety are the focus of the medication efforts. To that effect, he says, Tony was tried on and then off Clonidine, showing clear differences on and off medication. Toward the end of December he was begun on copharmacy of Lithium with the antidepressant: "We are a long way, I would say, from expecting self-control in a home situation that can still destabilize, which destabilizes Tony when it does."

The precision with which the ten people talking with me cover up the narrowness of their point of view impresses me. When I ask about Tony's future, the answer is a vague hope that he will spend less than another year in the hospital, and then something like a lifetime in what the psychiatrist calls parallel institutions. I assume that these are day hospitals or less restrictive settings. And Tony is only ten years old!

I talk to Tony. I expected a monster. Instead I find a boy who is impulsive but alert, making contact with me without difficulty. I wonder if anybody connects the experts' statements to life, or even to cost. Tony's hospitalization costs the state more than one hundred thousand dollars a year. For two years this child has been separated from real life and institutionalized in a hothouse where his pathology has been observed while it expanded in the absence of significant, age-appropriate activities. The staff is wedded to an ideology that says Tony lives only inside himself: not even that—inside his nervous system. Couldn't we do better?

Later I meet with Tony and his mother. I ask her why Tony is here. "I can't control him," she explains.

"Well, then, why aren't *you* here?"

Tony and Mother laugh. Though it is a strange question, I don't think it's funny. Mother looks at me, puzzled. "Tony will remain here as long as you and he don't fit," I say.

"That's a very different way of looking at things," Mother replies, and she is right. My view of Tony is that he exists not only inside himself but also in the interaction between him and his family.

During the session Tony throws a tantrum. I point out that he is not acting his age and ask his mother to help him be ten. She sets limits; he calms down; and I congratulate them both for their competence. Later I talk to the staff again. I am indignant because this child, who faces life imprisonment, could be living at home, treated in an outpatient facility. His family would need support and help in managing him, but outpatient treatment would be more efficient, less painful, and less costly.

Tony's life and future are organized by a very narrow view of people. This book is about a new way of looking. It is partly about me, partly about my theories and therapy, and always about the dynamics of families. It is a book of stories, because therapists are always storytellers. We are like anthropologists, exploring other people's lives. And like anthropologists, we are inevitably guided by our own experiences in describing others. The observer, however impartial, necessarily selects what seems important, shaping what is observed in ways that make sense.

I want to begin with my own family story. You need to know who I am, since I am the observer of the family dramas that follow. If I describe who I am, the family I grew up with, my family today, and how the world has changed during my lifetime, I will be telling you something about the transformations within all families, about the ways in which we all resemble each other.

Later I will be telling stories about families who have come to see me in therapy. I am concerned that these stories—with their family stresses, their difficulties, and their deviances—may titillate. But these people should not be seen as psychiatric specimens. They are people, like us.

First my family will appear very similar to yours. Then it

will become clear how little it differs from the families described in this book. Professionals tend to draw the line that separates therapist and client with heavy strokes. We center on difficulties and problems, but that is a highly artificial distinction.

Let me take you to my hometown, the setting of my early life. It was a shtetl, a small, tightly interwoven Jewish enclave, turning inward for protection and continuity within a majority society that was very different. My village was in rural Argentina, but it was nonetheless a shtetl.

Main Street Number 11 was one of seven streets in San Salvador, a small town in the province of Entre Ríos, Argentina. The "11" reflected the optimism of our town planners, who had hoped for a brighter future.

Our home—three large bedrooms, two dining rooms (one for guests), a newly installed bath, an outhouse, a detached kitchen, a maid's room, and a chicken coop—was connected to my father's company store: "Everything for the farmer, from tractors to espadrilles." The store had a large zinc-lined warehouse in which grain was stored until it was sold to Bunge y Born or Dreyfuss—large corporations that sold Argentinean grain throughout the world.

Four thousand people, one-fourth of them Jewish, lived within six blocks. I knew everybody in those six blocks, and they knew me. We were an important family in town. The neighbor to the left was my cousin Paulina, *La Gorda* (the Fat One). Between her house and the corner was my Uncle Elias's pharmacy. My father worked there as a bottle washer when he was eleven years old. To the right were my Aunt Ester and Uncle Isaac, with their hardware store. My father's parents, Jose and Jaiatable, lived next to them; by then they were supported by their children. Across the street was my Uncle Bernardo, my mother's brother, who was married to my Aunt Jailie, my father's sister, and their seven children. They owned a clothing store. My Uncle Isaac's mother and his older brother also lived in the same block. While we didn't live in an actual compound, membership in this extended family was in the air we breathed.

Let me open one of the doors in Main Street Number 11

and tell you its story. It is a hardware store. He is thin, she tends to fat; he is neat, she is flabby and unkempt. They yell at each other, but it is her voice that carries. Everybody in town knows she shacks up with the salesmen who come from out of town. I wonder what the attraction is, but I never wonder whether the rumor is true.

Another door: The pharmacist is an older, unmarried man. He lets his hair grow long like a Romantic poet, though his speech is as abrupt as the language of medical prescriptions. He carries on a love affair with the beautiful, married schoolteacher, who is some ten years his senior. Theirs became a Greek drama—by Sophocles or Aristophanes, depending on your perspective—when, fifteen years later, the pharmacist, still thin, married the schoolteacher's beautiful daughter, twenty years his junior. Whom would she select to avenge her father? It was only a matter of time.

Another door: Maria, the wife of Perez. She underwent a false pregnancy. We all waited for months while she grew bigger and bigger, waiting for the child who never came.

There were many stories. One man killed himself. One family had a retarded child, who was always hidden inside to conceal the family shame. Everybody knew these stories. But for us children, it was the sexual stories that were heard and amplified, and they have remained most vividly in my memory.

When in memory I enter the barbershop, the two butchers, the bakery, the movie, the pharmacies, and the grocery, I realize that all the stores are Jewish. Other than the two banks, I have no images of non-Jewish businesses. Perhaps only Tenerani, the publisher of the weekly newspaper. I had a big fight with his younger son. We fought until we could end with honor—when blood gushed from somebody's nose. I suppose whose was important then; it's not now.

I lived, my family lived, in a Russian shtetl transported, modified, and improved by the Argentine culture. We Jews stuck together, shopping in each other's stores. We coexisted in this checkered Argentinean town, but each community was self-sufficient. We even had our own drunkards. Goodson, who was Jewish, would shove his pushcart full of fish through the town once a week. He got drunk on grappa and insulted his customers, canceling sales by blustering: "If you want a fish, wet your ass." We children thought this was screamingly